

V. I. Lenin

Role and Functions of the Trade Unions

Under The New Economic Policy

Decision Of The C.C., R.C.P.(B.), January 12, 1922



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1. The New Economic Policy and The Trade Unions

The New Economic Policy introduces a number of important changes in the position of the proletariat and, consequently, in that of the trade unions. The great bulk of the means of production in industry and the transport system remains in the hands of the proletarian state. This, together with the nationalisation of the land, shows that the New Economic Policy does not change the nature of the workers' state, although it does substantially alter the methods and forms of socialist development for it permits of economic rivalry between socialism, which is now being built, and capitalism, which is trying to revive by supplying the needs of the vast masses of the peasantry through the medium of the market.

Changes in the forms of socialist development are necessary because the Communist Party and the Soviet government are now adopting special methods to implement the general policy of transition from capitalism to socialism and in many respects are operating differently from the way they operated before: they are capturing a number of positions by a "new flanking movement", so to speak; they are retreating in order to make better preparations for a new offensive against capitalism. In particular, a free market and capitalism, both subject to state control, are now being permitted and are developing; on the other hand, the socialised state enterprises are being put on what is called a profit basis, i. e., they are being reorganised on commercial lines, which, in view of the general cultural backwardness and exhaustion of the country, will, to a greater or lesser degree, inevitably give rise to the impression among the masses that there is an antagonism of interest between the management of the different enterprises and the workers employed in them.

2. State Capitalism in the Proletarian State and the Trade Unions

The proletarian state may, without changing its own nature, permit freedom to trade and the development of capitalism only within certain bounds, and only on the condition that the state regulates (supervises, controls, determines the forms and methods of, etc.) private trade and private capitalism. The success of such regulation will depend not only on the state authorities but also, and to a larger extent, on the degree of maturity of the proletariat and of the masses of the working people generally, on their cultural level, etc. But even if this regulation is completely successful, the antagonism of class interests between labour and capital will certainly remain. Consequently, one of the main tasks that will henceforth confront the trade unions is to protect in every way the class interests of the proletariat in its struggle against capital. This task should be openly put in the forefront, and the machinery of the trade unions must be reorganised, changed or supplemented accordingly (conflict commissions, strike funds, mutual aid funds, etc., should be formed, or rather, built up).

3. The State Enterprises that are being put on a Profit Basis and the Trade Unions

The transfer of state enterprises to the so-called profit basis is inevitably and inseparably connected with the New Economic Policy; in the near future this is bound to become the predominant, if not the sole, form of state enterprise. In actual fact, this means that with the free market now permitted and developing the state enterprises will to a large extent be put on a commercial basis. In view of the urgent need to increase the productivity of labour and make every state enterprise pay its way and show a profit, and in view of the inevitable rise of narrow departmental interests and excessive departmental zeal, this circumstance is bound to create a certain conflict of interests in matters concerning labour conditions between the masses of workers and the directors and managers of the state enterprises, or the government departments in charge of them. Therefore, as regards the socialised enterprises, it is undoubtedly the duty of the trade unions to protect the interests of the working people, to facilitate as far as possible the improvement of their standard of living, and constantly to correct the blunders and excesses of business organisations resulting from bureaucratic distortions of the state apparatus.

4. The Essential Difference between the Class Struggle of the Proletariat in a State which recognises Private Ownership of the Land, Factories, etc., and where Political Power is in the hands of the Capitalist Class, and the Economic Struggle of the Proletariat in a State which does not recognise Private Ownership of the Land and the Majority of the Large Enterprises and where Political Power is in the hands of the Proletariat

As long as classes exist, the class struggle is inevitable. In the period of transition from capitalism to socialism the existence of classes is inevitable; and the Programme of the Russian Communist Party definitely states that we are taking only the first steps in the transition from capitalism to socialism. Hence, the Communist Party, the Soviet government and the trade unions must frankly admit the existence of an economic struggle and its inevitability until the electrification of industry and agriculture is completed—at least in the main—and until small production and the supremacy of the market are thereby cut off at the roots.

On the other hand, it is obvious that under capitalism the ultimate object of the strike struggle is to break up the state machine and to overthrow the given class state power. Under the transitional type of proletarian state such as ours, however, the ultimate object of every action taken by the working class can only be to fortify the proletarian state and the state power of the proletarian class by combating the bureaucratic distortions, mistakes and flaws in this state, and by curbing the class appetites of the capitalists who try to evade its control, etc. Hence, the Communist Party, the Soviet government and the trade unions must never forget and must never conceal from the workers and the mass of the working people that the strike struggle in a state where the proletariat holds political power can be explained and justified only by the bureaucratic distortions of the proletarian state and by all sorts of survivals of the old capitalist system in the government offices on the one hand, and by the political immaturity and cultural backwardness of the mass of the working people on the other.

Hence, when friction and disputes arise between individual contingents of the working class and individual departments and organs of the workers' state, the task of the trade unions is to facilitate the speediest and smoothest settlement of these disputes to the maximum advantage of the groups of workers they represent, taking care, however, not to prejudice the interests of other groups of workers and the development of the workers' state and its economy as a whole; for only this development can lay the foundations for the material and cultural welfare of the working class. The only correct, sound and expedient method of removing friction and of settling disputes between individual contingents of the working class and the organs of the workers' state is for the trade unions to act as mediators, and through

their competent bodies either to enter into negotiations with the competent business organisations on the basis of precise demands and proposals formulated by both sides, or appeal to higher state bodies.

In cases where wrong actions of business organisations, the backwardness of certain sections of workers, the provocations of counter-revolutionary elements or, lastly, lack of foresight on the part of the trade union organisations themselves lead to open disputes in the form of strikes in state enterprises, and so forth, the task of the trade unions is to bring-about the speediest settlement of a dispute by taking measures in conformity with the general nature of trade union activities, that is, by taking steps to remove the real injustices and irregularities and to satisfy the lawful and practicable demands of the masses, by exercising political influence on the masses, and so forth.

One of the most important and infallible tests of the correctness and success of the activities of the trade unions is the degree to which they succeed in averting mass disputes in state enterprises by pursuing a far-sighted policy with a view to effectively protecting the interests of the masses of the workers in all respects and to removing in time all causes of dispute.

5. Reversion to Voluntary Trade Union Membership

The formal attitude of the trade unions to the automatic enrolment of all wage-workers as union members has introduced a certain degree of bureaucratic distortion in the trade unions and has caused the latter to lose touch with the broad mass of their membership. Hence, it is necessary most resolutely to implement voluntary enrolment both of individuals and of groups into trade unions. Under no circumstances must trade union members be required to subscribe to any specific political views; in this respect, as well as in respect of religion, the trade unions must be non-partisan. All that must be required of trade union members in the proletarian state is that they should understand comradely discipline and the necessity of uniting the workers' forces for the purpose of protecting the interests of the working people and of assisting the working people's government, i. e., the Soviet government. The proletarian state must encourage the workers to organise in trade unions both by juridical and material means; but the trade unions can have no rights without duties.

6. The Trade Unions and the Management of Industry

Following its seizure of political power, the principal and fundamental interest of the proletariat lies in securing an enormous increase in the productive forces of society and in the output of manufactured goods. This task, which is clearly formulated in the Programme of the Russian Communist Party, is particularly urgent in our country today owing to post-war ruin, famine and dislocation. Hence, the speediest and most enduring success in restoring large-scale industry is a condition without which no success can be achieved in the general cause of emancipating labour from the yoke of capital and securing the victory of socialism. To achieve this success in Russia, in her present state, it is absolutely essential that all authority in the factories should be concentrated in the hands of the management. The factory management, usually built up on the principle of one-man responsibility, must have authority independently to fix and pay out wages, and also distribute rations, working clothes, and all other supplies on the basis and within the limits of collective agreements concluded with the trade unions; it must enjoy the utmost freedom to manoeuvre, exercise strict control of the actual successes achieved in increasing production, in making the factory pay its way and in increasing profits, and carefully select the most talented and capable administrative personnel, etc.

Under these circumstances, all direct interference by the trade unions in the management of factories must be regarded as positively harmful and impermissible.

It would be absolutely wrong, however, to interpret this indisputable axiom to mean that the trade unions must play no part in the socialist organisation of industry and in the management of state industry. Their participation in this is necessary in the following strictly defined forms.

7. The Role and Functions of the Trade Unions in the Business and Administrative Organisations of the Proletarian State

The proletariat is the class foundation of the state accomplishing the transition from capitalism to socialism. In a country where the small peasantry is overwhelmingly predominant the proletariat can successfully fulfil this function only if it very skilfully, cautiously and gradually establishes an alliance with the vast majority of the peasantry. The trade unions must collaborate closely and constantly with the government, all the political and economic activities of which are guided by the class-conscious vanguard of the working class—the Communist Party. Being a school of communism in general, the trade unions must, in particular, be a school

for training the whole mass of workers, and eventually all working people, in the art of managing socialist industry (and gradually also agriculture).

Proceeding from these principles, the trade unions' part in the activities of the business and administrative organisations of the proletarian state should, in the immediate period, take the following main forms:

1. The trade unions should help to staff all the state business and administrative bodies connected with economies: nominate their candidates for them, stating their length of service, experience, and so forth. Right of decision lies solely with the business organisations, which also bear full responsibility for the activities of the respective organisations. The business organisations, however, must give careful consideration to the views on all candidates expressed by the trade unions concerned.
2. One of the most important functions of the trade unions is to promote and train factory managers from among the workers and the masses of the working people generally. At the present time we have scores of such factory managers who are quite satisfactory, and hundreds who are more or less satisfactory, but very soon, however, we must have hundreds of the former and thousands of the latter. The trade unions must much more carefully and regularly than hitherto keep a systematic register of all workers and peasants capable of holding posts of this kind, and thoroughly, efficiently and from every aspect verify the progress they make in learning the art of management.
3. The trade unions must take a far greater part in the activities of all the planning bodies of the proletarian state, in drawing up economic plans and also programmes of production and expenditure of stocks of material supplies for the workers, in selecting the factories that are to continue to receive state supplies, to be leased, or to be given out as concessions, etc. The trade unions should undertake no direct functions of controlling production in private and leased enterprises, but participate in the regulation of private capitalist production exclusively by sharing in the activities of the competent state bodies. In addition to participating in all cultural and educational activities and in production propaganda, the trade unions must also, on an increasing scale, enlist the working class and the masses of the working people generally for all branches of the work of building up the state economy; they must make them familiar with all aspects of economic life and with all details of industrial operations—from the procurement of raw materials to the marketing of the product; give them a more and more concrete understanding of the single state plan of socialist economy and the worker's and peasant's practical interest in its implementation.

4. The drawing up of scales of wages and supplies, etc., is one of the essential functions of the trade unions in the building of socialism and in their participation in the management of industry. In particular, disciplinary courts should steadily improve labour discipline and proper ways of promoting it and achieving increased productivity; but they must not interfere with the functions of the People's Courts in general or with the functions of factory managements.

This list of the major functions of the trade unions in the work of building up socialist economy should, of course, be drawn up in greater detail by the competent trade union and government bodies. Taking into account the experience of the enormous work accomplished by the unions in organising the economy and its management, and also the mistakes which have caused no little harm and which resulted from direct, unqualified, incompetent and irresponsible interference in administrative matters, it is most important, in order to restore the economy and strengthen the Soviet system, deliberately and resolutely to start persevering practical activities calculated to extend over a long period of years and designed to give the workers and all working people generally practical training in the art of managing the economy of the whole country.

8. Contact with the Masses—the Fundamental Condition for all Trade Union Activity

Contact with the masses, i. e., with the overwhelming majority of the workers (and eventually of all the working people), is the most important and most fundamental condition for the success of all trade union activity. In all the trade union organisations and their machinery, from bottom up, there should be instituted, and tested in practice over a period of many years, a system of responsible comrades—who must not all be Communists—who should live right among the workers, study their lives in every detail, and be able unerringly, on any question, and at any time, to judge the mood, the real aspirations, needs and thoughts of the masses. They must be able without a shadow of false idealisation to define the degree of their class-consciousness and the extent to which they are influenced by various prejudices and survivals of the past; and they must be able to win the boundless confidence of the masses by comradeship and concern for their needs. One of the greatest and most serious dangers that confront the numerically small Communist Party which, as the vanguard of the working class, is guiding a vast country in the process of transition to socialism (for the time being without the direct support of the more advanced countries), is isolation from the masses, the danger that the vanguard may run too far ahead and fail to "straighten out the line", fail to maintain firm contact with the whole army of labour, i. e., with the overwhelming majority of workers and peasants. Just as the very best factory, with the very best motors and

first-class machines, will be forced to remain idle if the transmission belts from the motors to the machines are damaged, so our work of socialist construction must meet with inevitable disaster if the trade unions—the transmission belts from the Communist Party to the masses—are badly fitted or function badly. It is not sufficient to explain, to reiterate and corroborate this truth; it must be backed up organisationally by the whole structure of the trade unions and by their everyday activities.

9. The Contradictions in the Status of the Trade Unions under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

From all the foregoing it is evident that there are a number of contradictions in the various functions of the trade unions. On the one hand, their principal method of operation is that of persuasion and education; on the other hand, as participants in the exercise of state power they cannot refuse to share in coercion. On the one hand, their main function is to protect the interests of the masses of the working people in the most direct and immediate sense of the term; on the other hand, as participants in the exercise of state power and builders of the economy as a whole they cannot refuse to resort to pressure. On the one hand, they must operate in military fashion, for the dictatorship of the proletariat is the fiercest, most dogged and most desperate class war; on the other hand, specifically military methods of operation are least of all applicable to the trade unions. On the one hand, they must be able to adapt themselves to the masses, to their level; on the other hand, they must never pander to the prejudices and backwardness of the masses, but steadily raise them to a higher and higher level, etc., etc. These contradictions are no accident, and they will persist for several decades; for as long as survivals of capitalism and small production remain, contradictions between them and the young shoots of socialism are inevitable throughout the social system.

Two practical conclusions must be drawn from this. First, for the successful conduct of trade union activities it is not enough to understand their functions correctly, it is not enough to organise them properly. In addition, special tact is required, ability to approach the masses in a special way in each individual case for the purpose of raising these masses to a higher cultural, economic and political stage with the minimum of friction.

Second, the afore-mentioned contradictions will inevitably give rise to disputes, disagreements, friction, etc. A higher body is required with sufficient authority to settle these at once. This higher body is the Communist Party and the international federation of the Communist Parties of all countries—the Communist International.

10. The Trade Unions and the Specialists

The main principles of this question are set forth in the Programme of the Russian Communist Party; but these will remain paper principles if constant attention is not paid to the facts which indicate the degree to which they are put into practice. Recent facts of this kind are: first, cases of the murder of engineers by workers in socialised mines not only in the Urals, but also in the Donets Basin; second the suicide of V. V. Oldenborger, Chief Engineer of the Moscow Waterworks, because of the intolerable working conditions due to the incompetent and impermissible conduct of the members of the Communist group, as well as of organs of the Soviet government, which prompted the All-Russia Central Executive Committee to turn the whole matter over to the judicial authorities.

The Communist Party and the Soviet government as a whole bear a far greater share of the blame for cases of this kind than the trade unions. But the present issue is not one of establishing the degree of political guilt, but of drawing certain political conclusions. Unless our leading bodies, i. e., the Communist Party, the Soviet government and the trade unions, guard as the apple of their eye every specialist who does his work conscientiously and knows and loves it—even though the ideas of communism are totally alien to him—it will be useless to expect any serious progress in socialist construction. We may not be able to achieve it soon, but we must at all costs achieve a situation in which specialists—as a separate social stratum, which will persist until we have reached the highest stage of development of communist society—can enjoy better conditions of life under socialism than they enjoyed under capitalism insofar as concerns their material and legal status, comradely collaboration with the workers and peasants, and in the mental plane, i. e., finding satisfaction in their work, realising that it is socially useful and independent of the sordid interests of the capitalist class. Nobody will regard a government department as being tolerably well organised if it does not take systematic measures to provide for all the needs of the specialists, to reward the best of them, to safeguard and protect their interests, etc., and does not secure practical results in this.

The trade unions must conduct all the activities of the type indicated (or systematically collaborate in the activities of all the government departments concerned) not from the point of view of the interests of the given department, but from the point of view of the interests of labour and of the economy as a whole. With regard to the specialists, on the trade unions devolves the very arduous duty of daily exercising influence on the broad masses of the working people in order to create proper relations between them and the specialists. Only such activities can produce really important practical results.

11. The Trade Unions and Petty-Bourgeois Influence on the Working Class

Trade unions are really effective only when they unite very broad strata of the non-Party workers. This must give rise—particularly in a country in which the peasantry greatly predominates—to relative stability, specifically among the trade unions, of those political influences that serve as the superstructure over the remnants of capitalism and over small production. These influences are petty-bourgeois, i. e., Socialist-Revolutionary and Menshevik (the Russian variety of the parties of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals) on the one hand, and anarchist on the other. Only among these trends has any considerable number of people remained who defend capitalism ideologically and not from selfish class motives, and continue to believe in the non-class nature of the "democracy", "equality", and "liberty " in general that they preach.

It is to this socio-economic cause and not to the role of individual groups, still less of individual persons, that we must attribute the survivals (sometimes even the revival) in our country of such petty-bourgeois ideas among the trade unions. The Communist Party, the Soviet bodies that conduct cultural and educational activities and all Communist members of trade unions must therefore devote far more attention to the ideological struggle against petty-bourgeois influences, trends and deviations among the trade unions, especially because the New Economic Policy is bound to lead to a certain strengthening of capitalism. It is urgently necessary to counteract this by intensifying the struggle against petty-bourgeois influences upon the working class.

Central Committee

Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

Endnotes

[1] The role and tasks of the trade unions under the conditions created by the New Economic Policy were examined at a Plenary Meeting of the C.C., R.C.P.(B.) on December 28, 1921. The draft of the decision on the trade unions adopted by the C.C., R.C.P.(B.) was written by Lenin.

The theses of January 12, 1922 were examined by the Political Bureau of the Central Committee which unanimously approved them and submitted them without amendments to the Eleventh Party Congress. They were unanimously passed at that Congress (see *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh syezdov, konferentsiy i plenumov Ts.K. [C.P.S.U. in Resolutions and Decisions of Congresses, Conferences and C.C. Plenary Meetings]*, Part 1, 1954, pp. 603-12)

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